Research:

One of the most famous personal conflicts in [American history](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_United_States), the Burr–Hamilton duel arose from a long-standing political and personal rivalry that had developed between both men over a course of several years. Tensions reached a bursting point with Hamilton's journalistic defamation of Burr's character during the 1804 [New York gubernatorial race](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governor_of_New_York) in which Burr was a candidate. Fought at a time when the practice of dueling was being outlawed in the northern United States, the duel had immense political ramifications. Burr, who survived the duel, would be [indicted](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indictment) for [murder](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Murder) in both [New York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York) and [New Jersey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey) (though these charges were either later dismissed or resulted in [acquittal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Acquittal)), and the harsh criticism and animosity directed toward him would bring about an end to his political career and force him into a self-imposed [exile](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Exile). Further, Hamilton's death would fatally weaken the fledgling remnants of the [Federalist Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federalist_Party) which, following the death of [George Washington](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Washington) (1732-1799) five years earlier, was left without a strong leader.

The duel was the final skirmish of a long conflict between [Democratic-Republicans](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic-Republican_Party) and Federalists. The conflict began in 1791 when Burr captured a Senate seat from [Philip Schuyler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Schuyler), Hamilton's father-in-law, who would have supported Federalist policies. (Hamilton was [Secretary of the Treasury](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Secretary_of_the_Treasury) at the time.) When the [Electoral College](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electoral_College_(United_States)) deadlocked in the [election of 1800](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1800), Hamilton's maneuvering in the [House of Representatives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_House_of_Representatives) caused [Thomas Jefferson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson) to be named President and Burr Vice President. In 1800, the Aurora published "*The Public Conduct and Character of* [*John Adams*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams)*, Esq., President of the United States*," a document highly critical of Adams, which had actually been authored by Hamilton but intended only for private circulation. Some have claimed that Burr leaked the document, but there is no clear evidence for this, nor that Hamilton held him responsible.

[](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Morgan-Lewis.jpg)

[http://en.wikipedia.org/skins-1.5/common/images/magnify-clip.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Morgan-Lewis.jpg)

[Morgan Lewis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morgan_Lewis_(governor)), endorsed by Hamilton, defeated Burr in the 1804 New York Gubernatorial election

When it became clear that Jefferson would drop Burr from his ticket in the [1804 election](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/U.S._presidential_election,_1804), the Vice President ran for the [governorship of New York](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Governor_of_New_York) instead. Hamilton campaigned viciously against Burr, who was running as an independent, causing him to lose to [Morgan Lewis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morgan_Lewis_(governor)), a Democratic-Republican endorsed by Hamilton.

Both men had been involved in duels in the past. Hamilton had been a principal in 10 shot-less duels[[*clarification needed*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Please_clarify)] prior to his fatal encounter with Burr, including duels with [William Gordon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Gordon) (1779), [Aedanus Burke](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aedanus_Burke) (1790), [John Francis Mercer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Francis_Mercer) (1792-1793), [James Nicholson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Nicholson_(naval_officer)) (1795), [James Monroe](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Monroe) (1797), and Ebenezer Purdy/[George Clinton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_Clinton_(vice_president)) (1804). He also served as a second to [John Laurens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Laurens) in a 1779 duel with [General Charles Lee](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Lee_(general)) and legal client John Auldjo in a 1787 duel with [William Pierce](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Pierce_(politician)).[[2]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-1) In addition, Hamilton claimed to have had one previous honor dispute with Burr;[[3]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel" \l "cite_note-2) Burr claimed there were two.[[4]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-3)

Additionally, Hamilton's son, [Philip](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Philip_Hamilton&action=edit&redlink=1), was killed in a November 23, 1801 duel with [George I. Eacker](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=George_I._Eacker&action=edit&redlink=1) initiated after Philip and his friend Richard Price partook in "[hooliganish](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hooliganism" \o "Hooliganism)" behavior in Eacker's box at the [Park Theatre](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Park_Theatre_(Manhattan,_New_York)). This was in response to a speech, critical of Hamilton, that Eacker had made on July 3, 1801. Philip and his friend both challenged Eacker to duels when he called them "damned rascals."[[5]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-4) After Price's duel (also at Weehawken) resulted in nothing more than four missed shots, Hamilton advised his son to [*delope*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delope), and throw away his fire. However, after both Philip and Eacker stood shotless for a minute after the command "present", Philip leveled his pistol, causing Eacker to fire, mortally wounding Philip and sending his shot awry. This duel is often cited as having a tremendous psychological impact on Hamilton in the context of the Hamilton-Burr duel.[[6]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-5)

Aaron Burr and Alexander Hamilton first came into public opposition during the famed [election of 1800](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_presidential_election,_1800). In the election, Aaron Burr ran as Vice-President on the [Democratic-Republican Party](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic-Republican_Party) ticket with [Thomas Jefferson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Jefferson) against [John Adams](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Adams) (the incumbent [Federalist](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Federalist_Party_(United_States))). [Electoral college](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Electoral_college) rules at the time gave each elector two votes for president, with the candidate receiving the second most votes becoming vice president. The Democratic-Republican Party therefore planned to have 72 of their 73 electors vote for both Jefferson and Burr, with the remaining elector voting twice for Jefferson. However, the electors failed to execute this plan, so Burr and Jefferson tied with 73 votes each. As mandated by law in the event of no candidate winning a majority, the election was moved to the [United States House of Representatives](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_House_of_Representatives), which was controlled by the Federalists, many of whom were loath to vote for Jefferson. Hamilton, however, regarded Burr as far more dangerous than Jefferson and used all his influence to ensure Jefferson's election. On the 36th ballot, the House of Representatives gave Jefferson the presidency, with Burr becoming vice president.

**Charles Cooper's letter**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| [Search Wikisource](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Special:Search/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel) | [Wikisource](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikisource) has original texts related to:  [***Hamilton-Burr duel correspondences***](http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Hamilton-Burr_duel_correspondences) |

On April 24, 1804, a vitriolic letter originally sent from [Charles D. Cooper](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_D._Cooper) to [Philip Schuyler](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Schuyler), Hamilton's father-in-law[[7]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-6) was published in the [*Albany Register*](http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Albany_Register&action=edit&redlink=1) in the context of opposing Burr's candidacy.[[8]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-7) It claimed to describe "a still more despicable opinion which General Hamilton has expressed of Mr. Burr" at a political dinner. In a letter delivered by William P. Van Ness, Burr demanded "a prompt and unqualified acknowledgement or denial of the use of any expression which would warrant the assertion of Dr. Cooper". Hamilton's reply on May 20 indicated that he could not be held responsible for Cooper's interpretation of his words. Burr's reply on May 21, also delivered by Van Ness, stated that "political opposition can never absolve gentlemen from the necessity of a rigid adherence to the laws of honor and the rules of decorum".[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-Winfield_216-8) Hamilton replied that he had "no other answer to give than that which has already been given". This letter was delivered to Nathaniel Pendleton on May 22 but did not reach Burr until May 25.[[9]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-Winfield_216-8) The delay was due to negotiation between Pendleton and Van Ness in which Pendleton submitted the following paper:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **“** | General Hamilton says he cannot imagine what Dr. Cooper may have alluded, unless it were to a conversation at Mr. Taylor's, in Albany, last winter (at which he and General Hamilton were present). General Hamilton cannot recollect distinctly the particulars of that conversation, so as to undertake to repeat them, without running the risk of varying or omitting what might be deemed important circumstances. The expressions are entirely forgotten, and the specific ideas imperfectly remembered; but to the best of his recollection it consisted of comments on the political principles and views of Colonel Burr, and the results that might be expected from them in the event of his election as Governor, without reference to any particular instance of past conduct or private character.[[10]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-9) | **”** |

The delivery of Hamilton's second letter, a second paper submitted by Pendleton further offered "in relation to any other language or conversation or language of General Hamilton which Colonel Burr will specify, a prompt or frank avowal or denial will be given." This offer was not accepted and a challenge was formally offered by Burr and accepted by Hamilton.[[11]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-10)

Many subsequent historians have considered the causes of the duel to be flimsy and have thus either characterized Hamilton as "suicidal", Burr as "malicious and murderous," or both.[[12](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-11)

In the early morning hours of July 11, 1804, Burr and Hamilton departed by separate boats from [Manhattan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Manhattan) and rowed across the [Hudson River](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hudson_River) to a spot known as the [Heights of Weehawken](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Weehawken,_New_Jersey) in [New Jersey](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey), a popular dueling ground below the towering cliffs of the [Palisades](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Jersey_Palisades). Hamilton and Burr agreed to take the duel to Weehawken because dueling had been outlawed in New York (the same site was used for 18 known duels between 1700 and 1845.).[[13]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-12) In an attempt to prevent the participants from being prosecuted, procedures were implemented to give all witnesses [plausible deniability](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plausible_deniability). For example, the pistols were transported to the island in a [portmanteau](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Portmanteau_(suitcase)), enabling the rowers (who also stood with their backs to the duelists) to say under oath that they had not seen any pistols.

Burr, [William P. Van Ness](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Peter_Van_Ness) (his second), Matthew L. Davis, and another (often identified as [Samuel Swartwout](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Samuel_Swartwout)) plus their rowers reached the site first at half past six, whereupon Burr and Van Ness started to clear the underbrush from the duelling ground. Hamilton, [Judge Nathaniel Pendleton](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nathaniel_Pendleton) (his second), and [Dr. David Hosack](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/David_Hosack) arrived a few minutes before seven. Lots were cast for the choice of position and which second should start the duel, both of which were won by Hamilton's second who chose the upper edge of the ledge (which faced the city) for Hamilton.[[14]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-Winfield_219-13) However, according to historian and author [Joseph Ellis](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joseph_Ellis), since Hamilton had been challenged, he had choice of both weapon and position. Under this account, it was Hamilton himself that chose the upstream or north side position.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-Ellis_24-14)

All first-hand accounts of the duel agree that two shots were fired; however, Hamilton and Burr's seconds disagreed on the intervening time between the shots. It was common for both principals in a duel to fire a shot at the ground to exemplify courage, and then the duel could come to an end. Hamilton apparently fired first, and into the air, though it is not clear whether this was intentional, much less that Burr perceived him to be "[throwing away his fire](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Delope)" (as it did not follow the standard protocol). Burr returned fire and hit Hamilton in the lower abdomen above the right hip. The [musket ball](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musket_ball) ricocheted off Hamilton's second or third [false rib](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/False_ribs)—fracturing it—and caused considerable damage to his internal organs, particularly his [liver](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liver) and [diaphragm](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thoracic_diaphragm) before becoming lodged in his first or second [lumbar vertebra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lumbar_vertebra). According to Pendleton's account, Hamilton collapsed immediately, dropping the pistol involuntarily, and Burr moved toward Hamilton in a speechless manner (which Pendleton deemed to be indicative of regret) before being hustled away behind an umbrella by Van Ness because Hosack and the rowers were already approaching.[[16]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-15)

It is entirely uncertain which principal fired first, as both seconds' backs were to the duel in accordance with the pre-arranged regulations of the duel (and also so the men could later testify that they "saw no fire"). After much research to determine the actual events of the duel, Pulitzer-prize winning historian Joseph J. Ellis gives his interpretation:

Hamilton did fire his weapon intentionally, and he fired first. But he aimed to miss Burr, sending his ball into the tree above and behind Burr's location. In so doing, he did not withhold his shot, but he did waste it, thereby honoring his pre-duel pledge. Meanwhile, Burr, who did not know about the pledge, did know that a projectile from Hamilton's gun had whizzed past him and crashed into the tree to his rear. According to the principles of the [code duello](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Code_duello), Burr was perfectly justified in taking deadly aim at Hamilton and firing to kill.[[15]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burr%E2%80%93Hamilton_duel#cite_note-Ellis_24-14)